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ST PETERSBURG--A PROGRESS REPORT

I've got some promising new leads.

Peter Paganozzi is one of 11,000 Russian-Canadians who live in Montreal. He is Vice-President of Petrifond Foundations, an engineering firm with headquarters in the Town of Mount Royal. He was born in Montreal 45 years ago, went to English schools, and has an engineering degree from McGill. He has never been to Russia, but he speaks Russian at home, and regards it as his mother tongue. His ancestors immigrated from Italy to Moscow around 1840. His grandfather was a Russian Orthodox priest who fled to Serbia after the Revolution, along with 200,000 other Old Believers. Peter's main passion is the Orthodox Church. He is chairman of the "Foundation of Hope", which is responsible for sending aid to St. Petersburg from St. Nicholas Cathedral, the Russian Orthodox church on St. Joseph Boulevard, Outremont.

Paganozze has been pointing out to me that before Peter the Great, the Orthodox Church dominated the politics of Russia. It could make or break czars. Two of the czars had even been sons of the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow. When Peter the Great replaced the Patriarchy with a secular Minister of the Crown, the Church was torn apart between those who were willing to collaborate (the Westernizers) and those opposed (the "slavophiles" or Old Believers). The debate has been raging ever since. After the Revolution, the communists executed 60,000 slavophile priests, and won over the rest by restoring the Patriarchy in Moscow. Millions of Old Believers either went underground, or emigrated to the Balkans, western Europe, Brazil and North America, becoming the "Russian diaspora". They established a new "Free Church Outside Russia", with their own synod of Bishops and an elected Archbishop, waiting for the day when communism would collapse back home, and expecting that the collaborating church would go down with it. The Old Believers would then come back to re-establish the Church as the dominant power in Russian politics that it used to be.

Communism may have collapsed, but the collaborative Patriarch is still in power in Moscow, maybe thanks to the struggle going on between Yeltsin and the Chamber of Deputies.

In 1985, at a synod of Bishops held in New York City, the Bishop of Montreal, Vitaly Oustinow, was elected the new Archbishop of the whole Free Church Outside Russia. So the centre of the resistance to the Patriarch of Moscow is now in St. Nicholas Cathedral in Outremont! Since perestroika, Old Believers who stayed at home in Russia, including some Bishops, have started to emerge from underground. In St. Petersburg, no Bishop emerged, so the parish chose to put itself directly under the jurisdiction of Archbishop Vitaly of Montreal. That is why Peter Paganozzi set up the "Foundation of Hope". At stake is not only feeding the hungry back home, but the winning of a struggle for power that has been going on for three hundred years.

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Some 40 members of the Cathedral gather once every second month, on a Saturday morning, to package and label boxes of food, seeds, clothes and medicine that have been purchased and donated from around North America, and which will be shipped free of charge from the Port of Montreal by MOS Shipping of St. Petersburg. A joyous communal meal is served in the Cathedral hall, once a Jewish synagogue, when the packing is finished.

Archbishop Vitaly was born in St. Petersburg in 1921. His father was an admiral in the czar's imperial navy, and organized the Black Sea escape route that the Paganozzis took from the Crimea to Serbia the following year. Vitaly Oustinow and his family wandered from Serbia to France, Czechoslovakia, Germany, France, England and Brazil before finally settling in Montreal in 1951. The Archbishop will not return to Russia until he can become the Patriarch of Moscow.

But another active member of his Montreal parish will be returning to her native town of St. Petersburg in February. Mrs. Gann left there at the age of four, and has not been back since. When she returns, her first stop will be the basement of a church that Stalin had converted to an electrical manufacturing plant. The present Mayor of St. Petersburg, a former member of the Communist party, has allowed the basement to be used by the followers of the Montreal Archbishop. The main body of the church upstairs was granted by the Mayor to the followers of the Patriarch of Moscow, Archbishop Vitaly's arch enemy.

Mme Gann will be accompanied in this dramatic visit by her son Anatoly Gann, a commercial account manager at the headquarters of the Bank of Montreal, and one of the most active members of Paganozzi's Foundation of Hope. Born in Montreal, he also attended English schools, and earned an MBA at McGill, but like the Paganozzis, he and his wife speak Russian at home. He is very optimistic about the future, believing that private enterprise will bring democracy to Russia, and that democracy will bring back the true church.

But the Patriarch of Moscow also has followers in Montreal. Their church is St. Pierre--St. Paul Russian Orthodox on Rene Levesque Boulevard. They also have an aid programme to St. Petersburg, because that is where Anna Saakian is from--the Westmount hair-dresser with a flair for organizing. Her aid programme had begun to languish, when she managed to hook up with Eric Trigg, the distinguished-looking retired Vice-President of Alcan. I had lunch with the two of them last week. Anna told Mr. Trigg that her secret desire was to open up a cosmetics business of her own, with an outlet in St. Petersburg.

You will remember that the two of them were trying to get the Canadian-run Salvation Army in St. Petersburg to collaborate with the pro-Moscow church of St. Petersburg in distributing aid from Montreal. Is that part of a joint strategy between the Patriarchy and the evangelical churches to help keep ahead of the "Free"

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Church? Who knows? Right now, it looks like each of the two rival Montreal churches is going to have a container on the next MOS ship leaving in 10 days time!

On Wednesday, I will be in Toronto to see the widow of one of czar Nicholas II's last descendants. She administers the Olga Ramonov Foundation, named after her deceased mother-in-law. It purchases medical equipment for St. Petersburg hospitals, and works in collaboration with Archbishop Vitaly.

In Toronto I will also be seeing an officer of the Salvation Army, to get a briefing on the work that his colleague Jeff Ryan from Guelph, Ontario, is doing in St. Petersburg, and how that relates to the invasion of Russia by Western evangelical sects that is now taking place, with mass rallies, water dippings, and television preachings. The Russian Parliament is now debating a bill that would give the state the power to control this influx by requiring all foreign missionaries to register. Archbishop Vitaly of Montreal believes that the Patriarch of Moscow, Alexei II, is the real power behind this bill, and that the Patriarch's target is not the western evangelical sects, but Vitaly's own Free Orthodox Church, which is threatening the Patriarch's power base by working for the return of the monarchy.

In Montreal, there is a manufacturer of women's clothing who has opened up a chain of retail stores in Russia, including St. Petersburg. I will be seeing Mr. Bryant Bramson, President of Tangerine Dresses, later this week. I'd like to establish contact with his St. Petersburg manager, so that I can talk with his sales clerks when I get there and ask them what they know about their company's home town, and whether they have heard of the Archbishop in Montreal trying to de-throne the Patriarch of Moscow.

Finally, I flew to Boston this weekend to see a superb puppeteer from St. Petersburg doing a street act at Harvard Square (see attached article from the Boston Globe). I taped his inspired performance on Hi-8. Igor Fokin would be willing to collaborate with me in creating acts in his St. Petersburg theatre to illustrate whatever aspects of our story could not be covered by actuality footage. He shares an apartment there with his painter-wife, their two young sons (promising musicians and actors), his father-in-law (an established St. Petersburg painter), and his mother-in-law (fluent in English). A performance by Igor on St. Catherine Street during the Jazz Festival of Montreal, in front of his modest marquee, "The Wooden Horse Puppet Theatre of St. Petersburg", would draw enthralled crowds of young and old, would make a very seductive opening sequence, and could introduce the main story-telling thread of the film.